

Message Text

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ACTION EA-09

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 AID-05 CIAE-00 COME-00 EB-07 FRB-03

INR-07 NSAE-00 USIA-06 TRSE-00 XMB-02 OPIC-03 SP-02

CIEP-01 LAB-04 SIL-01 OMB-01 DODE-00 PM-04 H-02 L-03

NSC-05 PA-01 PRS-01 SS-15 /083 W

----- 117586

R 040243Z MAR 76

FM AMEMBASSY WELLINGTON

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 994

C O N F I D E N T I A L WELLINGTON 0829

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: ELAB, NZ

SUBJ: FOL SECRETARY KNOX COMMENTS ON FOL PRESIDENT SKINNER

1. DURING RECENT LUNCHEON WITH LABATT, FEDERATION OF LABOUR (FOL) SECRETARY JIM KNOX TALKED AT LENGTH ABOUT FOL PRESIDENT SIR THOMAS SKINNER. KNOX WAS OPENLY CRITICAL OF SKINNER FOR FAILING TO PROVIDE LEADERSHIP DURING WHAT KNOX SEES AS A CRUCIAL PERIOD FOR NEW ZEALAND LABOR. KNOX SEES RADICAL LEFTIST TRADE UNIONISTS RAPIDLY MOVING IN TO EXPLOIT THIS LEADERSHIP VACUUM. WITH THE COST OF LIVING RISING NEARLY TWICE AS FAST AS WAGES, RADICALS HAVE READY MADE ISSUE AND ARE USING IT TO GREAT ADVANTAGE AT LOCAL UNION AND TRADES COUNCIL LEVELS. KNOX SAID SERIOUSNESS OF PROBLEM CAN BE SEEN IN MID-FEBRUARY PUBLIC STATEMENT BY KEN DOUGLAS, COMMUNIST SECRETARY OF BOTH WELLINGTON DRIVERS UNION AND WELLINGTON TRADE COUNCIL. AT DRIVERS STOPWORK MEETING DOUGLAS SAID UNION WOULD SETTLE WAGE PROBLEMS ON ITS OWN WITHOUT ASSISTANCE OR INTERFERENCE FROM "THE RATS AND MICE OF THE FOL".

2. KNOX SAVED HIS STRONGEST CRITICISM FOR THE WAY SKINNER HANDLES THE AUCKLAND TRADES COUNCIL (ATC). SKINNER IS PRESIDENT OF THE ATC BUT HAS ABDICATED MOST
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OF HIS RESPONSIBILITIES, ALLOWING COMMUNIST VICE

PRESIDENT BILL ADNERSEN TO RUN MEETINGS AND GENERALLY ACT AS ATC SPOKESMAN. KNOX IS PARTICULARLY CONCERNED THAT SKINNER WILL LOSE ALL CONTROL OF THE ATC AND THAT THIS, IN TURN, WILL GIVE ANDERSEN THE POWER BASE HE NEEDS TO GET HIMSELF OR KEN DOUGLAS ELECTED TO FOL NATIONAL EXECUTIVE.

3. DISCUSSING SKINNER'S FUTURE, KNOX SAID THE ONLY THING HE WAS SURE OF WAS THAT SKINNER WOULD BE RE-ELECTED AS FOL PRESIDENT IN MAY. SKINNER, AGED 67, HAS GIVEN NO INDICATION THAT HE WILL STEP DOWN BEFORE THIS EXPIRATION OF HIS NEXT FIVE YEAR TERM, BUT KNOX FEELS THIS IS A DISTINCT POSSIBILITY. KNOX THOUGHT A LIKELY SCENARIO WOULD BE FOR SKINNER TO RESIGN HIS FOL POST IF HE CAN OBTAIN POST OF CHAIRMAN OF THE NEW ZEALAND SHIPPING CORP. HE IS NOW CHAIRMAN OF THE NEW ZEALAND SHIPPING LINE.

4. COMMENT - KNOX'S CRITICISM OF SKINNER'S LEADERSHIP HAS A HIGH DEGREE OF VALIDITY AND IS ECHOED BY OTHER TRADE UNIONISTS INCLUDING CARPENTERS SECRETARY (AND FOL EXECUTIVE MEMBER) ASHLEY RUSS. HOWEVER, NONE OF THE FOL'S MODERATE LEADERS HAS EITHER THE POWER OR THE INSTINCTUAL FORTITUDE TO CHALLENGE SKINNER. GIVEN THIS SITUATION, THERE APPEARS TO BE LITTLE THE MODERATES CAN DO BUT BIDE THEIR TIME AND WAIT FOR SIR TOM TO MAKE HIS EXIT. THIS IS HARDLY A NEW GAME IN FOL POLITICS, BUT THE TWIN PROBLEMS OF LACK OF CONFIDENCE IN SKINNER'S LEADERSHIP AND INCREASED POWER ON THE LEFT GIVE IT AN IMPORTANCE THAT WAS NOT PREVIOUSLY PRESENT.
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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: X
Capture Date: 01 JAN 1994
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: LABOR RELATIONS, LABOR UNION OFFICIALS
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Draft Date: 04 MAR 1976
Decaption Date: 01 JAN 1960
Decaption Note:
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Authority: BoyleJA
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 28 MAY 2004
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1976WELLIN00829
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: n/a
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: GS
Errors: N/A
Film Number: D760082-0373
From: WELLINGTON
Handling Restrictions: n/a
Image Path:
ISecure: 1
Legacy Key: link1976/newtext/t19760392/aaaaddua.tel
Line Count: 90
Locator: TEXT ON-LINE, ON MICROFILM
Office: ACTION EA
Original Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Original Handling Restrictions: n/a
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 2
Previous Channel Indicators: n/a
Previous Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Reference: n/a
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Authority: BoyleJA
Review Comment: n/a
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 01 JUN 2004
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review History: RELEASED <01 JUN 2004 by greeneet>; APPROVED <27 SEP 2004 by BoyleJA>
Review Markings:

Margaret P. Grafeld
Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
04 MAY 2006

Review Media Identifier:
Review Referrals: n/a
Review Release Date: n/a
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: FOL SECRETARY KNOX COMMENTS ON FOL PRESIDENT SKINNER
TAGS: ELAB, NZ, (SKINNER, THOMAS), (KNOX, JIM)
To: STATE
Type: TE
Markings: Margaret P. Grafeld Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 04 MAY 2006